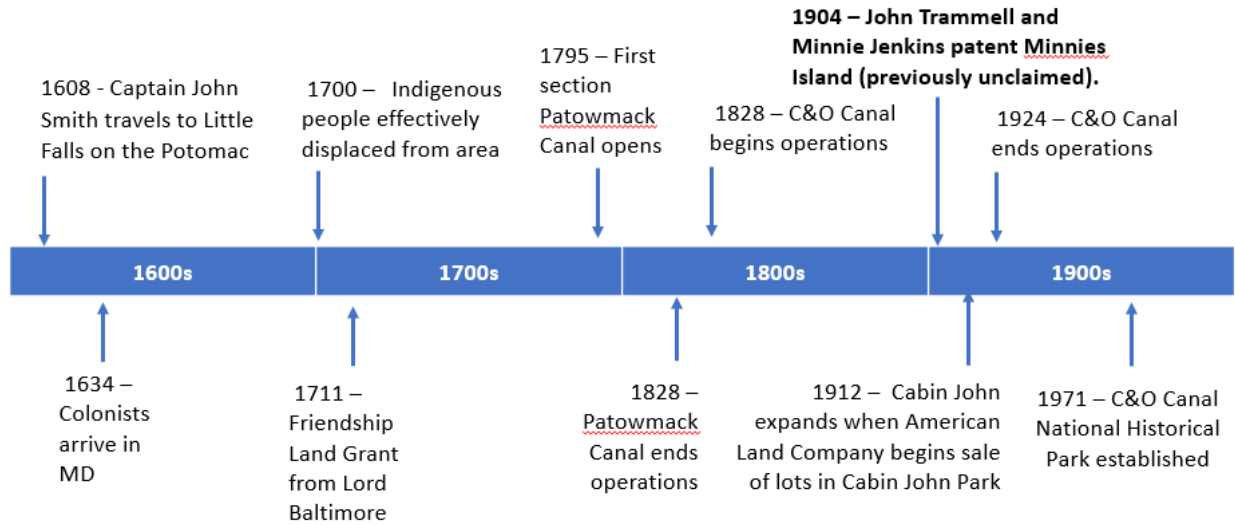


# The History of Minnie's Island

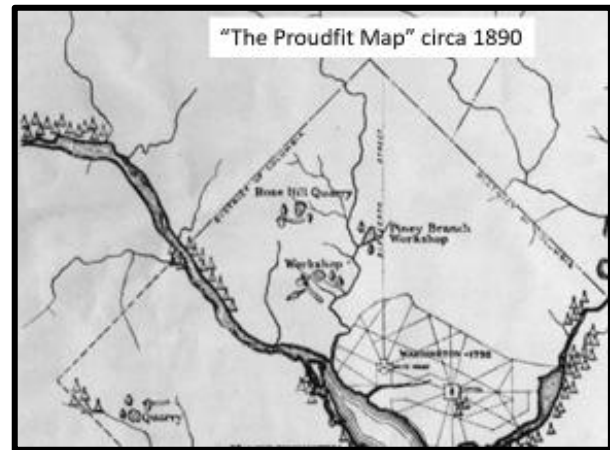
This document addresses the very recent human history of Minnie's Island. This document will be updated as new source material is identified. Please contact [info@minniesisland.org](mailto:info@minniesisland.org) if you have information to share.

## Colonial Times

There was undoubtedly activity on the island in pre-colonial time as well as during operation of the Patowmack and C&O Canal.



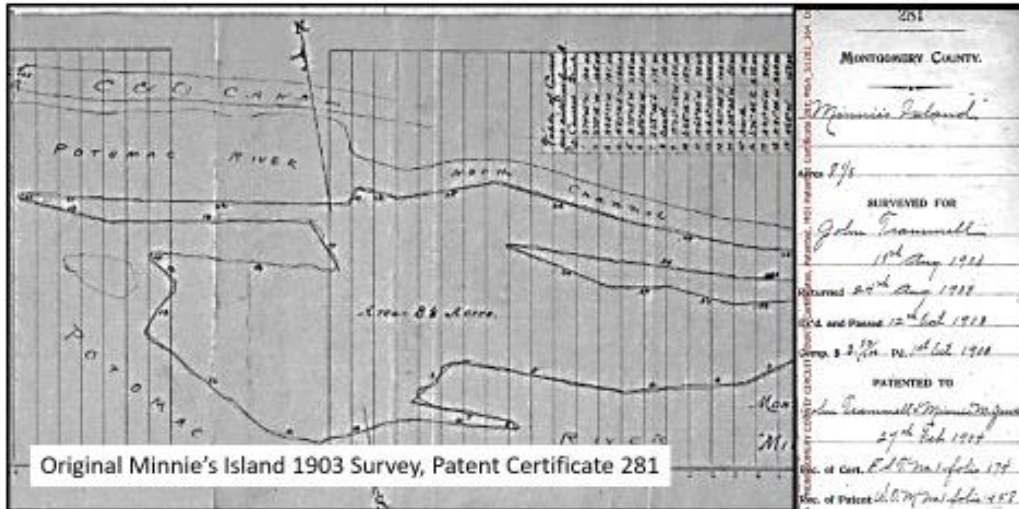
A map developed by S.V. Proudfit in 1890 shows the general locations of Native American villages around Washington DC. Arrowheads, spearheads, and even pottery shards have been found in what is today Cabin John, Maryland. Tribal groups hunted and fished as they traveled through the area. The Piscataway people, part of the Algonquins, located through southern Maryland, traveled north along the Potomac River to the Cabin John area and beyond what is now Point of Rocks. As groups followed the Potomac River, we can assume that Minnie's Island was also frequented as a hunting and fishing site.



## 1904 – John Trammel and Minnie Jenkins

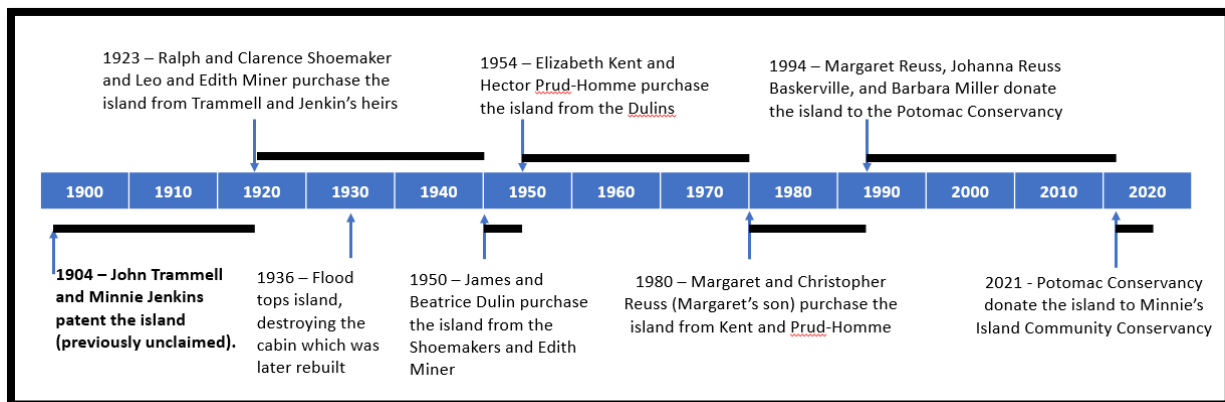
Formal ownership of Minnie's Island begins in 1904 when cousins John Trammel and Minnie Jenkins held a patent for the previously unclaimed island.

# The History of Minnie's Island



John Trammel owned a popular restaurant/tavern in Great Falls Virginia called “Trammels.” The island was named “Minnie’s Island” on the patent record, and we assume the island is named after Minnie Jenkins. From 1904 to 1914, John Trammel and Minnie Jenkins held patents for a total of five islands in the Potomac. There are no records of activity on the island during this time, although they may have constructed the first cabin, cookhouse, and well. Minnie Jenkins died in 1920 at the age of 35 years and she was buried with her parents in Great Falls Virginia. It is possible that a still was operated on the island during prohibition (1920 to 1933). The large diameter well on the island is still operable and early photos show a cook house beside the well.

From 1904 to today, Minnie’s Island has been either a residence, vacation property, or conservation area.



## 1923 – Ralph and Clarence Shoemaker

Minnie’s was purchased by Ralph and Clarence Shoemaker in 1923. Clarence’s life is best summarized by the following biography contained on the Washington Biologists Field Club website:

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“Clarence was born in 1874. At the age of seven he moved to the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C., and he spent most of his life in this family home. His interest in zoology began very early in life, and he found when he entered George Washington University that his own studies had already carried him ahead of the curriculum then being taught. After a year in college he, therefore, took a position at the Smithsonian Institution, first as a clerk in the International Exchanges section in 1902 and then in 1910, as a scientific aid in the Division of Marine, Aquatic, and Terrestrial invertebrates. In 1916, he was involved in collecting coral and marine invertebrates in the Danish West Indies. He became assistant curator in 1921, and an associate curator of the division of marine invertebrates in 1942. His early interest had been in spiders and he gained a reputation in this field even before coming to the invertebrate division. Clarence retired in 1944 at the age of 70 but continued as a research associate until his death on December 28, 1958. His scientific reports on the Amphipoda were worldwide in scope and he published about 70 papers in this field. His meticulous and orderly manner of working left all his materials ready for a successor to continue his research and publish his unfinished manuscripts after his death with scarcely a break. Clarence was active in many scientific and conservation organizations including the Biological Society of Washington, Washington Academy of Science, American Ornithologists Union, and American Academy for the Advancement of Science. In addition, Clarence was a charter member of the American Society of Mammalogy and the Society of Systematic Zoology. Clarence was most involved, however, with the Audubon Naturalist Society and served as chairman for the field committee in charge of arranging “outings” for almost 50 years. He also served on the executive committee for many years. He is best remembered for his extensive and complete record of the Society’s early history that is contained in a set of publications from 1902 and in hundreds of photographs of club members and outings. His reminiscences of the changing Society and the Washington area are a treasured asset of the Audubon Naturalist Society. Clarence was elected as a member of the Washington Biologists’ Field Club in 1912 and terminated his membership in 1942.”



We don't know if Ralph and Clarence lived on the island, but we know that Clarence led frequent field trips and social events on the island. Clarence was an avid photographer, and his archive of hundreds of large format black and white photos is maintained by the DC Historical Society. Additional records and photos by Shoemaker are contained in the records of the DC Audubon Society located in the Smithsonian Archives. Many of these photos (circa 1920 to 1930) were taken on Minnie's Island. It is interesting the photo collection identifies the island as “Minniesha Island.” There are no other mentions of this name outside this photo collection.

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A picnic at Minnies - possibly the DC Audubon Society. Many of the early photos show the men wearing ties and jackets and the women wearing fancy hats and dresses.



Naturalist gathering on Minnies. Note the fishing creel, binoculars, and butterfly net. Shoemaker also captured many wildflower photos, likely from Minnies and the Cabin John area.



The original cabin, well house, and cook house. All of these structures were destroyed by a flood in 1936, where the water level approached the top of the cabin door. We assume a new cabin was built on the site of the old cabin shortly after the flood.



### 1950 – James and Beatrice Dulin

James and his wife purchased the island in 1950. James was a banker and a lawyer and he retired from the American Security and Trust Company. According to their granddaughter, James often brought a

## The History of Minnie's Island

boy's club to the island for hiking, hunting, and camping. We could not find other records of their activity on the island.

### 1954 – Elizabeth Kent

Elizabeth Gregory Kent and a business partner purchased Minnie's from the Dulins in 1954 and own it for 26 years. According to her obituary, Elizabeth grew up in Berkeley California and studied painting in Paris. She was a sculptor and an abstract painter in the pointillist style and a student of Zen philosophy. Her husband, Sherman Kent was a Yale University history professor who, during WWII and 17 years of Cold War era service in the CIA, pioneered many methods of intelligence analysis. He is often described as "the father of intelligence analysis." In 2000, the CIA opened the Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis, which is part of the CIA University.

Sherman Kent often brought colleagues out to Minnie's as a retreat. Elizabeth noted that "I used to go very frequently, especially during the Vietnam War. It was immensely important in all of our lives, and in times that were difficult during the war."

The Kents were approached over the years by people interested in buying the island. In 1979 they received an offer for \$100,000 for the property from a "developer type". Fearing the property would be developed, they instead sold the property to their friends, the Reuss family for \$50,000, knowing that they would maintain the island as a private natural retreat.

### Margaret and Christopher Reuss – 1980

Margaret and her son Christopher purchased the island in 1980 and used it as a family retreat.

According to her obituary, "Margaret was a political, social and environmental activist who was also chair of the economics department at the University of the District of Columbia [UDC]. Dr. Reuss and her late husband, Wisconsin congressman Henry Reuss, were stalwarts of the Democratic Party's liberal wing from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s. She demonstrated against the Vietnam War, volunteered on local issues involving the homeless and taught economics for 15 years at the old Federal City College, which became part of UDC."



Margaret loved the outdoors and would frequently spend time on the island. She told a Washington Post reported that "You'd come out and there was nobody here,". "It's the sense if you're out here of just having dropped into the land the way it used to be -- totally wild." She was enroute to the island in 1980 when the fast-flowing, rain-swollen Potomac River tipped her canoe over in a strong current. She hung on to branches that reached 15 to 20 feet from the riverbank until the Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department retrieved her.

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Margaret's husband, Henry Reuss was elected as Democrat to the US House of Representatives from the 5<sup>th</sup> District of Wisconsin and served from 1955 to 1983. He chaired the House Subcommittee on Conservation and Natural Resources and was inducted to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 2007. He noted that "we and our friends used it (Minnies) joyously for twenty years until we found navigation difficult."

The island was also a temporary home for Christopher, who camped in a cabin there for two years, pumping water from a well, cooking on a kerosene burner and heating with a wood stove. He would canoe or wade the 100 yards to shore during the week and drive to his law office in the district. Christopher died in 1986 from a kayaking accident on a tributary to the Shenandoah River.



### Donation to the Potomac Conservancy – 1994

In 1994, Margaret Reuss, Johanna Reuss Barkerville, and Barbara Miller donated Minnie's Island to the Potomac Conservancy in honor of Christopher. The story of the donation is told in the March 1995 issue of the C&O Canal Association newsletter, "Along the Towpath." The donation is closely tied to the Canoe Cruisers Association and the founding of the Potomac Conservancy, which mobilized to protect the Potomac Gorge as a result of Virginia Senator Chuck Robb who clearcut the forest along the banks of the Potomac River below his home. Because of the cutting, the Canoe Cruisers looked for organizations that could protect the Virginia shore of the Potomac through easements. No suitable organization could be found, and the Potomac Conservancy was incorporated in 1993 to serve this purpose. The work of the Potomac Conservancy in removing debris from the river gained the attention of Margaret Reuss, and she offered to donate Minnie's Island. The dedication of the island was held on December 3, 1994. Joe Bryson and Mac Thornton accepted the deed from Bobbi Miller at the dedication. The C&O Canal Association notes that "well over 200 people attended the dedication. Canoe and raft shuttles were operated by the Canoe Cruisers Association. Refreshments and food were provided by Coca-Cola, Grevey's Restaurant, Utz Foods, Old Heurich Brewery, and the



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Kayakers and Canoeists Auxiliary of Brookmont. The following day, the island was opened to the public and about 1,000 people visited. “

### 1994 – The Potomac Conservancy

The Potomac Conservancy owned Minnie's Island from 1994 to 2021. During this time, the Conservancy hosted various conservation and educational activities on the island. From 2005 to 2018 the Conservancy and its volunteers restored and operated the Lockhouse at Lock 8 of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal as The River Center, an environmental education facility, under a lease in partnership with the National Park Service C&O Canal National Historical Park. Canoes and kayaks used by Potomac Conservancy staff and volunteers to ferry visitors to Minnie's Island for activities were stored in the rough basement of the lockhouse. Volunteers opened the lockhouse River Center to visitors on weekends and also hosted musicians and story tellers in an outdoor series called Voices of the River. Faced with growing river conservation priorities, the Potomac Conservancy began to reduce activities at the lockhouse and Minnie's Island by 2015 and started looking for an organization that could assume more active ownership of the island. They also ended their partnership with the National Historical Park and closed the River Center at Lockhouse 8.

### 2021 – Minnie's Island Community Conservancy

In 2021, Minnie's Island Community Conservancy (MICC) was established with the specific objective of restoring and providing local control and stewardship of Minnie's Island. Burr Gray, Jack Mandel, Pascal Pittman, and Mac Thornton – all residents of Cabin John --were actively involved in establishing MICC and in working with the Potomac Conservancy on the transfer.



In the years since assuming ownership, MICC has made considerable progress in repairing the cabin, building trails, and controlling invasive plants on the island. MICC is excited for the future as we are looking for ways to expand access and programming on the island.

In March 2024, the MICC Board approved the Mission and Vision Statement:

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*The MICC mission is to restore, protect, and maintain Minnie's Island. Our vision is to engage the community in making the Island an inviting, accessible, and safe environment for nature-based recreation, social connection, education, conservation, scientific research, and the arts.*

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Prepared by Joe Saliunas, February 2025, updated March 2026. Special thanks to Judy Wells for her review.

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